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LEBANON: Foreign Support for the Druze Offensive in the Shuf and Outlook for the Conflict

The Druze attacks on Lebanese Army and Phalangist positions in the Shuf mountains southeast of Beirut have benefited from significant Syrian and Palestinian aid. Pro-Syrian Palestinian forces have been directly involved in the battles and Syrian logistical and material aid have been critical to the Druze ability to sustain the conflict. Evidence of direct Syrian involvement in the fighting is less definitive but we think it likely that at least some Syrian officers are involved with the Druze and Palestinian forces. The Libyan and Iranian Revolutionary Guard forces in Lebanon also appear to be seeking to enter the battle on the Druze side if they have not already done so.

Pro-Syrian Palestinian groups like the PFLP-GC, DFLP and Abu Musa's Fatah rebels participated in the successful Druze attack on Bhamdun on 4-5 September and in the attacks of Suq al-Gharb on 10-11 September. There may be as many as 1500 Palestinians involved. The Palestinian involvement gives the Druze militia significantly enhanced military skills since the Palestinian forces are far better trained than the Druze. Moreover, Palestinian involvement suggests that Damascus is seeking to return Palestinian forces to the greater Beirut area and the Shuf. This would reverse the outcome of last year's fighting which led to the PLO's expulsion from Beirut.

The evidence of Syrian logistical aid is also overwhelming. The tanks and artillery Druze forces have been using are Syrian-supplied. Reliable observers have seen Syrian military trucks delivering ammunition for the Druze at forward Syrian positions. A Syrian military presence has been established within Bhamdun itself since the town was captured. Control of Bhamdun allows Syria to directly resupply the Druze forces in the Shuf by movement along the Beirut-Damascus highway.

Lebanese government claims that Syrian regular troops have been directly involved in the fighting have not been confirmed. Nonetheless, the pro-Syrian Palestinian groups have long had Syrian officers seconded to them to serve as advisers and these officers are probably involved in the fighting. There probably are also a few Syrian advisers with the Druze units.

The relatively small Libyan and Iranian Revolutionary Guard expeditionary forces in Lebanon have been moving towards the battlefield. These radical groups can be expected to press hard to join in the battle to demonstrate their revolutionary credentials. The Syrians, who control the roads these forces must use to reach the fighting, may be willing to allow them to help the Druze.

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Outlook

The Druze have accomplished their initial objective of driving the Phalange out of most of the Shuf. With Syrian backing and Palestinian support the Druze now appear determined to seize control of the ridgeline overlooking Beirut itself. The attack on Saturday night was intended to capture Suq al-Gharb, a key town that dominates the ridgeline. Other Druze forces appear to be moving to cut the Beirut-Sidon coastal highway south of Damur, thus isolating Beirut from Israeli-occupied southern Lebanon.

If the Druze and Palestinians can overrun Suq al-Gharb the symbolic and psychological impact may be more than the Amin Gemayel government can handle:

-- Shia Muslims in south and west Beirut, who have so far hung back from rising up against the Lebanese Army, might well feel emboldened to do so once they see who is winning in the Shuf. This would open a second front for the Army at a time when it is hard pressed to deal with the Druze.

-- A decisive victory at Suq al-Gharb probably would encourage the Druze-Palestinian-Syrian coalition to press their offensive into Beirut's suburbs. The Presidential compound at Babda would be a key target.

-- Collapse of the Suq al-Gharb line might also encourage hardline Phalangists to move against Amin in order to form a new Christian government which would request direct Israeli aid. There is already pressure on Amin to throw in the Maronites' lot with Jerusalem.

-- The defeated Lebanese Army would come under intense pressure and might split on confessional lines.

President Assad is likely to continue to press the offensive against Amin's regime until the Syrians' Druze and Palestinian allies encounter stiff resistance. As long as the Druze hold the initiative there is little reason for Assad to compromise and accept a ceasefire. Additional Druze victories are likely to whet Syrian and Druze appetites for more. Assad's goals will become greater. He could even become emboldened to consider a direct move by his Druze and Palestinian allies into Beirut to establish a Syrian puppet regime.

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